DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 265 CS 004 332

AUTHOR Sutton, Wendy K.
TITLE Developing Literary Appreciation Via Contemporary Adolescent Literature.
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association Transmountain Regional Conference (3rd, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, October 20-22, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; English Instruction; *Literary Conventions; *Literature Appreciation; *Reading Materials; *Reading Material Selection; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

Currently popular and increasingly complex adolescent literature deserves a close look by literature teachers. Authors of literature intended for this audience are becoming more adventuresome and are using a wider range of literary techniques than was previously true. Such techniques include slice of life, anti-hero, open-ending, interior monologue, multi-levels of meaning, satire, parody, allegory, first person narration, flashbacks, and multiple protagonist/ narrators. Examples of these may be seen in such books as: "The Pigman," "Go Ask Alice," "Lisa, Bright and Dark," "Are You There, God, It's Me, Margaret," and "I Am the Cheese." The increasing sophistication in techniques might be used by teachers as a way of connecting popular juvenile literature with adult literature. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED158265

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Wendy K. Sutton

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Wendy K. Sutton

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, B. C.

Developing Literary Appreciation Via Contemporary Adolescent Literature

A change of attitude toward the popular reading of young people has been due among English teachers for some time. It is probably safe to say that books which teenagers choose to read for themselves have generally been considered to be non-literary and therefore not suitable for inclusion in a literature curriculum. The many articles proclaiming the "falling of taboos" in juvenile fiction have undoubtedly strengthened this negative view. However, along with these dramatic changes in content have come some equally dramatic changes in literary structure, changes which are important for teachers to be aware of and to build upon.

To accommodate the more complex world being depicted in much adolescent literature, many authors have become more adventuresome and are experimenting with an ever-widening range of literary techniques. For example, reflecting the existential stance found in much adult literature, the 'slice of life,' the anti-hero, the open-ending are all to be found in novels being written for young people today. As a form of transition literature, the adolescent novel has never been more appropriate. Thus, by having a knowledge of and showing an interest in some of the books that are quickly changing hands among young people, teachers will have new opportunities to 'connect' with other literature and consequently be in a stronger position to improve the literary understanding of their students.

Studies of response to literature, such as those spearheaded by

James Squire, provide disturbing evidence of the need to help students acquire an awareness of the wide variety of forms that literary expression can take. Squire found that students brought narrow, hampering predispositions to the examination of a piece of literature which resulted in their approaching each story with the same criteria "regardless of the uniqueness of a single work of fiction." He found that many of the critical dispositions brought by students to the reading of literature -- dispositions which he emphasized were often "acquired concerns" -- almost inevitably restricted their response and their ability to interpret. For example, for many students the significant test of the quality of literature was whether it was "true to life." "Good description" was another of the fixations which he found adversely affected meaningful response to literature. In fact, many students did not appear to know how to read fiction as fiction for they lacked any sense of aesthetic distance. They were often baffled, for instance, when presented with a 'hero' who was not eventually changed for the better by the events of the story, as is often the case in an existential novel. It is interesting to note the Squire, and subsequent researchers in response to literature, found that the quality of individual interpretations was generally unrelated to either the intelligence or to the reading ability of the students.

Squire and others also found that students seemed to share a fixation on the obvious features of plot. They almost always misinterpreted literature which derived its primary value from the experience and feeling of the characters rather than from the narrative exposition of the plot. In fact, such findings led Squire to strongly recommend that teachers re-examine their current instructional practices to ensure that narrow,

inflexible literary criteria were not being encouraged by their teaching.

A major study by Alan Purves -- Literature Education in Ten Countries -- provides support for many of Squire's conclusions. For example, Purves found that many of the responses expressed by students were the direct result of secondary schooling which inculcated a preferred set of responses to literature, with students in different countries deomonstrating a different set of acquired responses.

Such limited understanding among students is particularly distressing when viewed in the light of recent studies which conclude that novels currently being written for adolescents tend to be novels of character, not novels of incident. In a recent study of fifty years of Newbery award and honour books, for example, it was noted that the action in these novels had shifted from the externally adventurous to the psychologically motivated. There has been an increasing emphasis upon characterization and theme rather than plot. Other changes in literary style and structure that have been identified in both adult and juvenile fiction are the abandonment of the strict, chronological progression of action, the use of interior monologue, sudden shifts between external and internal action, and the use of informal style, slang and dialect. An awareness of changes such as these should be reflected in the discussions of literature taking place in today's English classes.

One literary mode which I have found becoming increasingly prevalent in juvenile literature is fiction offering more than a literal level of meaning. Forms of satire and irony, although not always identified or responded to as such on a conscious level, are to be found in many recent books being read by young people. Young readers often enjoy the techniques of humour used by the writer or

illustrator even though they are not fully aware of the satiric intent. As the author exaggerates and distorts reality, they are amused and may even begin to recognize that the unreality he has created is, in fact, perhaps closer to the truth -- that the exaggeration and absurdities are exposing the foolishness, inconsistencies and false values of human beings. They begin to sense that there are levels of meaning beyond the literal level of what they read. They will likely respond to the humour but at first be unable to identify why it is funny; or, if they sense why it is funny, they may still be unable to articulate the aspect of human nature being satirized until they have an opportunity to discuss it.

Parody is a form of satire which often appears in juvenile literature. Older students recognize and enjoy the cynical satiric humour found in James Thurber's 'modern' fables, Eve Merriam's parodies of nursery rhymes in Inner City Mother Goose, and the macabre visual interpretations found in The Chas. Addams Mother Goose. For younger readers, Ian Flemming's Chitty Chitty Bang Bang is a parody or spoof of the style of the typical detective story and is full of tongue-in-cheek humour and gross exaggerations as the writer pokes fun at this particular form of writing.

Satire can be a form of allegory or extended metaphor in which the author intends his characters and their actions to be understood in terms of themselves as well as on a level beyond the surface meaning of the narrative. One form of allegory familiar to young people is the fable in which animals, through their speech and actions, reveal supposed truths about mankind. An excellent introductory example of the satirical use of the fable, or extended fable, is The Black

Sheep by Jean Merrill. The story can stand on its own as a humorous fantasy created by the exaggeration, incongruities and absurd situations presented, but it can also be enjoyed for its more significant second level of meaning. Dramatizing the danger of built-in obsolescence and of bowing to pressures of social conformity, the author shows how 'people' react when they feel threatened by something which is different. When encouraged to question and discuss, students will recognize many of the parallels between this society of sheep and their own, between the events in this fantasy and those of the real world. Such a discussion would enable students to read with greater understanding and pleasure George Orwell's Animal Farm. In this more complex extended fable they will recognize how the pigs manipulated the other animals by taking advantage of their gullability, stupidity, fear of and submission to authority, short memories and basic natures. They will be able to identify many of the persuasive techniques used by the pigs, ranging from reason and logic to the use of fear, force, and violence. Although they may not be able to grasp all of the political implications of this bitter satire directed at communism, they may actually gain greater insights by interpreting it and responding to it in more general, universal terms. [The Black Sheep and a recent allegory by Alan Arkin, The Lemming Condition, are ideal books to read aloud to students -- laughs, discussion and insights guaranteed].

Another political satire is John Neufeld's Sleep Two, Three, Four!, an effective example of the fact that satirists do not always rely upon humour as a vehicle for their criticism. Neufeld, popular with teenagers for his Lisa, Bright and Dark, sets his story in the United States of 1981 and blatantly describes it as a totalitarian state whose

leaders use violent, terrorist techniques and "homogeneous communities" to maintain their authority and the supremacy of the 'white and healthy' -- a situation which Neufeld bitterly and clearly implies was fast approaching under the Republican administration of Nixon. Even if students miss some of the political and social connotations and allusions -- far less likely today after Watergate and Holocaust -- they enjoy the fast-moving action involving people their own age. Usually satire, by its very nature, is not suspenseful reading nor is the reader likely to identify with the characters strongly enough to be genuinely concerned about what happens to them. However, Neufeld has achieved both suspense and empathy for his characters and uses these effectively to hold the interest of his teenage readers.

Both Animal Farm and Sleep Two, Three, Four! end with the totalitarian leaders firmly in control, although Neufeld's novel ends on a slight note of optimism. Typical of satirists, neither author is offering a positive solution or course of action but seems to be asking: Is this the way it is going to be or are people going to stir themselves and do something about it? If reading these books leads students to thoughtful discussions of the literary techniques used and of the issues presented, the time spent has been worthwhile.

Before leaving this brief look at some of the juvenile fiction offering more than one level of meaning, it seems worth mentioning that much of the implication of science fiction and science fantasy read by young people today is satiric in nature and intention. As writers describe many of the frightening, inhuman aspects of the future, they force the reader to view a world which, in too many respects, is merely an extension of many of the attitudes and pursuits

of the present. Sometimes animals are the vehicles for the message; sometimes people.

The satire in Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH by Robert O'Brien is subtle and gentle but challenges readers to take a serious look at society's almost blind obsession with and submission to technology and science; O'Brien's Report from Group 17 is much less subtle, as is his excellent and very popular Z for Zachariah. Another portrayal of the lack of human integrity in much scientific experimentation is found in William Sleator's Esher-inspired The House of Stairs in which five sixteen-year-old orphans are used by scientists for behaviour modification and thought-control experiments. Concern over other consequences of modern society's apparent submission to technology and science also underlies the future worlds described by widely-read science fiction writers John Christopher, Peter Dickenson, and Ben Bova.

The questionable use of animals for scientific experimentation is one of the themes of John Donovan's new novel simply called Family: a novel. Donovan is already well-established among teenage readers for his I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip and Remove Protective Coating a Little at a Time. Family begins in a university laboratory where scientists are conducting a series of experiments upon twenty-three apes, four of whom become the focus of this novel. Sasha, the narrator, wise in his experience with researchers, has a premonition that the humans are about to involve the apes in their research with vivisection and the manipulation of body parts. "They think that one day in their future, humans will be able to be made up of parts that other humans will put together.... We -- you and I -- will help them, they think." Sasha finds only three others brave enough to escape with

him and the four evolve into a closely knit 'family.' The story of their flight, the refuge they find, the subsequent events, and their final surrender to the inevitable are most effectively developed and the novel as a whole is thought-provoking and powerful.

Paul Zindel, another popular writer among young people for his The Pigman and My Darling, My Hamberger, presents a similar theme in his satirical drama Let Me Hear You Whisper which deals with scientific experiments involving dolphins. Discussion of the issues and of the literary techniques found in these pieces of fiction would help to prepare students for more complex novels such a Richard Adams' new novel on a similar theme, The Plague Dogs.

Experimentation with first person narration is another interesting innovation in juvenile fiction with the result that teenagers are now reading impressionist novels of ranging complexity. Sometimes they view the events from the restricted perspective of one narrator, sometimes through the eyes of two or more speakers. The role of this first person narrator also varies in many intriguing ways. Often it will be the voice of a rather minor character in an observer-narrator in Neufeld's Lisa, Bright and Dark: "My name is Betsy Goodman, and I count less than almost anyone else in this whole story." In Neufeld's Edgar Allan, the twelve-year-old narrator begins: "This is a story about my father, and about God. Neither is very easy to understand."

Perhaps the most prevalent use of the first person in recent adolescent fiction is the protagonist as narrator. Frequently the story is told in the present tense to give a sense of immediacy, a sense of being part of the events as they unfold. Fifteen years ago Emily Neville used this technique in her very popular It's Like This, Cat. Marilyn

Sachs and Barbara Wersba, both widely read, are two others who used it effectively in The Bears' House and The Dream Watcher respectively.

One of the authors with the largest following is Judy Blume for her characters range in age and consequently her books appeal to students from grades four to twelve. Ironically, this very diversity has resulted in some of her books becoming 'controversial' for children, who will read anything and everything by an author they like, have strayed into books which many adults feel are "unsuitable." Forever by Blume is such a book. Norma Klein, author of Mom, the Wolf Man and Me, is another whose books are beginning to be viewed with suspicion for the same reason.

Blume usually has her protagonists tell their stories in the past tense. This enables her to use an episodic rather than a strict sequential pattern and to introduce more personal reflection by the narrator. In her extremely popular Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret, Blume also introduces young readers to the literary technique of interior monologue, easily identifiable through the use of italic print.

The diary form, beginning for many young readers with The Diary of Anne Frank and reaching a high point of infamy in Go Ask Alice, is another literary structure involving first person narration. A year or two ago I overheard some high school students informally debating whether Go Ask Alice was an authentic personal statement. To support their argument they cited structural aspects in the book which are characteristic of a novel and inconsistent with the spontaneous, on-going narration of a diary. Surely a book leading to such literary insights cannot be all bad!

To suitably reflect the speaker, each of these forms of first person narration uses an informal style which often includes slang,

profanity, jargon -- for example, jargon of the drug culture or of street gangs -- and dialect. In order to present young protagonists and yet use more sophisticated language and style, authors often write from the vantage point of maturity, a looking back at events by a now older narrator. Appropriately, the setting and the time of the action influence the style of language. Two extremely effective books using this perspective and technique are The Slave Dancer by Paula Fox, recalling events during the slave traffic to America, and The Upstairs Room by Johanna Reiss, a moving account of two Jewish girls hiding from the Nazi during World War II. Undoubtedly both these books will be of renewed interest as a consequence of the two super-sagas which recently dominated television time.

A number of writers of adolescent fiction have begun to use both exterior and interior monologue. Perhaps the most extreme example of the former is Don't Play Dead Before You Have To by Maia Wojciechowska, already known to students for The Shadow of a Bull and Tuned Out. In this monologue a twelve-year-old is talking to a five-year-old boy he is baby-sitting but the contributions of the youngster to this 'conversation' are only revealed through the comments and responses of the narrator.

Interior monologues are more complex for they demand that the reader have the ability to recognize and deal with sudden shifts from internal to external action and back again. Frequently these monologues are indicated through the use of italics, as in Blume's Are Your There God? It's Me, Margaret, or are prefaced with obvious context clues which indicate the shifts. Kim Platt, popular for his Headman and Chloris and the Creeps, uses portions of interior monologue in The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear.

The literary technique of flashbacks in first person narration is a very useful device for it enables the author to abandon a strict, chronological sequence of events. This demands, of course, that the readers be capable of reconstructing an accurate sequence of events on their own. High school students were perhaps first aware of this technique when they read the well-liked Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell back in Grade Six. Through the skillful use of flashbacks, O'Dell added action and interaction to a story limited to and told by one character.

On a par in popularity with Judy Blume is S.E. Hinton, author of The Outsiders and That Was Then, This Is Now. Consistent in her use of first person narrators, Hinton, in her latest book Rumble Fish, encloses a series of flashbacks between an opening and closing chapter. Rather than plot she presents through the narration a depressing, unrelieved picture of a personality disintegrating, a disintegration of character reminiscent of that so evident in Go Ask Alice. Another author to use flashbacks is June Jordan in her beautifully written His Own Where. A modern Romeo and Juliet, this existential novel is a successful blend of flashbacks, dream flashes in a stream-of-consciousness Black English, and lilting, poetic prose.

Ten years ago Paul Zindel introduced teenagers to the use of more than one protagonist as narrator in The Pigman. In this "memorial epic" two narrators, John and Lorraine, take alternate chapters to tell their story. Zindel cleverly establishes and maintains the separate identities, points of view and narrative style of each character. Since then a number of adolescent novels have utilized two or more narrators, the most complex being A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich

by Alice Childress. Childress tells her story of a thirteen-year-old Black boy becoming hooked on heroin through the 'voices' of eleven narrators, each closely involved with the central figure Benjie Johnson. Although perhaps not as widely read as it deserves, this book is destined to become very popular among high school students as it has recently been released as a film, starring Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield. A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich is truly a book all teachers should know about and read.

One more book which I cannot resist mentioning is I Am the Cheese by Robert Cormier, author of the now controversial The Chocolate War. Most cleverly crafted, this novel begins with a first person narration but suddenly switches to official-looking taped dialogue between the fourteen-year-old protagonist and a mysterious interrogator called Brint. The taped dialogues are interspersed with an account of the events being given by an omniscient, third person narrator. The result is a highly complex, suspenseful novel with social implications at the end which are shattering. This is another adolescent novel that teachers should be familiar with, both for its literary qualities and for the significance of its content.

The educational axiom of 'starting where the learner is' is as true for the teaching of literature as it is for any branch of learning. It is important, therefore, that teachers be in touch with the spontaneous reading of their students and thus be aware of and ready to build upon the literary experiences they bring to the classroom.

Bibliography of Juvenile Titles

Addams, Charles. The Chas. Addams Mother Goose. Windmill/Harper, 1967.

Anonymous. Go Ask Alice. Prentice Hall, 1971.

Arkin, Alan. The Lemming Condition. Harper & Row, 1976.

Blume, Judy. Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. Bradbury Press, 1970.

_____. Forever. Bradbury Press, 1975.

Childress, Alice. A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich. Coward McCann, 1973. (Avon)

Cormier, Robert. The Chocolate War. Pantheon, 1974.

_____. I Am the Cheese. Pantheon, 1977.

Donovan, John. Family: A Novel. Harper & Row, 1976.

_____. I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip. Harper & Row, 1969.

_____. Remove Protective Coating a Little at a Time. Harper & Row, 1973.

Fleming, Ian. Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Random House, 1964.

Fox, Paula. The Slave Dancer. Bradbury Press, 1973

Hinton, S.E. The Outsiders. Viking, 1967.

_____. Rumble Fish. Delacorte, 1975.

_____. That Was Then, This Is Now. Viking, 1971.

Jordan, June. His Own Where. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1971.

Merriman, Eve. The Inner City Mother Goose. Simon & Schuster, 1969.

Merrill, Jean. The Black Sheep. Pantheon, 1969.

Neufeld, John. Edgar Allen. S.G. Phillips, 1968.

_____. Lisa, Bright and Dark. Phillips, 1968.

_____. Sleep Two, Three, Four! Harper & Row, 1971.

Neville, Emily. It's Like This, Cat. Harper & Row, 1963.

O'Brien, Robert C. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. Atheneum, 1972.

_____. Report from Group 17. Atheneum, 1973.

_____. Z for Zachariah. Atheneum, 1975.

O'Dell, Scott. Island of the Blue Dolphin. Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

Orwell, George, Animal rm. Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1946.

Platt, Kin. The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear. Chilton, 1968.

_____. Chloris and the Creeps. Chilton, 1973.

_____. Headman. Morrow, 1975.

Reiss, Johanna. The Upstairs Room. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972.

Sachs, Marilyn. The Bears' House. Doubleday, 1971.

Sleator, William. The House of Stairs. Dutton, 1974.

Wersba, Barbara. The Dream Watcher. Atheneum, 1968.

_____. Run Softly, Go Fast. Atheneum, 1970.

Wojciechowska, Maia. Don't Play Dead Before You Have To. Harper, 1970.

_____. Shadow of a Bull. Atheneum, 1964.

_____. Tuned Out. Harper, 1968.

Zindel, Paul. Let Me Hear You Whisper. Harper & Row, 1970.

_____. My Darling, My Hamberger. Harper, 1969.

_____. The Pigman. Harper, 1968.